Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England

Review Number: 1859
Publish date: Thursday, 19 November, 2015
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ISBN: 9780199679782
Date of Publication: 2014
Price: £55.00
Pages: 320pp.
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Publisher url: http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199679782.do
Place of Publication: Oxford
Reviewer: Katie Bridger

Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England is, above all, a well-researched and enjoyable book, designed to persuade the reader of the relationship between the late medieval gentry, romance and book production. The main body of evidence employed consists of nine romances extracted from a series of miscellany manuscripts, namely The Avowing of Arthur, Octavian, Sir Amadace, Sir Cleges, Sir Degrevant, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, Sir Isumbras and Sir Launfal. Possible dates of composition for these texts are presented in the appendix, followed by a comprehensive bibliography. The evidence extracted centres on the motifs, or specific themes, present in the romances. The author frequently reminds the reader of the historical significance of these texts, placing them firmly in the context of the world of the gentry. Johnston’s success is closely associated with his encouragement to look beyond the common parapet. As an example, the above are less well known and have received limited treatment in comparison with the more popular Chaucerian or Malorian focus. His reinforcement of the importance of the regional contribution turns attention from the regimented professionalism of London-based output towards the more individualistic sources from the localities.

The structure of the book lends itself to a considered, thematic approach. It is divided into six chapters, with the latter three being regional case studies: chapter four handles landowners in Derbyshire, chapter five concerns a more well-known individual based predominantly in the North Riding of Yorkshire and chapter six considers a southern Lancashire family. It demonstrates the flexibility of the romance genre and its relevance for different components of the gentry. In each case the sources are presented as holding a certain appeal for the gentry specifically by empathising with their socioeconomic concerns. This is exhibited in the book’s introduction through the example of MS Brogyntyn II.i; here the miscellany contains an extract from a treatise on hawking where an ethnographic list of birds coincides with contemporary social order.

The intra-chapter structure is particularly helpful – splitting the chapters with sub-headings reminds the reader of the author’s design at each stage of the argument. Each segment exists almost as a sub-chapter; the titles are carefully thought out with succinct descriptions. This is especially welcome in the first chapter, which Johnston dedicates to a consideration and description of the emergence of the gentry. It is an absolutely necessary foundation. There is a common and frustrating habit – thankfully absent in this book – to ‘jump straight in’ to a complex discussion without considering the basics. For the gentry, Johnston
follows the definition of Susan M. Wright, who briefly defines the gentry as being positioned between the nobility and the yeomanry with land as their chief source of income. It is understandable that the author would adopt the foundation of a definition from another whose work on the Derbyshire gentry is clearly relevant to his own case studies. But, given that the stance is situated in the preface, it would have been helpful perhaps to have noted briefly that this definition, whilst generally suitable, may not fit all circumstances. The current lack in the historiography of a clear, all-encompassing definition of who the gentry were during this period is partially due to the huge variety in experience of those included in its membership. In a book such as this, which employs regional case studies, diversity is not absent. It is accepted, however, that the definition in the preface is more of a precursor to later discussion, and that this is not the main focus of the work.

In his discussion of definition Johnston uses the gentry’s social position – as being situated below the nobility and above the ‘non-gentil franklins and yeomen’ (p. 22) – to infer a position of simultaneous superiority and inferiority. This is consequently separated to support the argument: superiority above the yeomanry resides in the evidence of gentry literacy and book awareness, whilst their inferiority to the nobility is reflected in their reliance upon them to support their cultural production. Johnston’s theory concerning the more cultural concerns of the gentry is embedded into his definition, elevating the discussion above the well-trodden. This is not undertaken at the expense of the typical composition: the familiar tripartite structure, occupations, interest in property transactions and bearing of arms are built into the definition. It is somewhat surprising to note that, despite a series of allusions, the community element as a key historiographical component of the gentry topic is not explored further here. An exploration of this theme would have been an interesting point of discussion, particularly in a regional work such as this.

Johnston thus moves to develop the relationship between gentry and contemporary literary practice. He suggests that the emergence of a distinctively different type of Middle English romance occurred concurrently with that of the gentry in the latter part of the 14th century. The question of what came first raises the point that those responsible for creating the romances must have been aware of the ‘crystallization’ (p. 48) of a new social group in order to incorporate relevant interests and themes into the romances. The reader is reminded consistently of the relationship between gentry and book production, but if the gentry forged their own niche, can the changes in the romance genre still be interpreted as a response to their emergence? Johnston acknowledges that contemporaries were unlikely to have been aware of these romances as being part of a specifically new sub-genre, but asserts that ‘romance had long been a primary vehicle for aristocratic self-conception’ (p. 89) prior to the period in question.

Johnston skilfully combines the heavy – and necessary – literary content with historical detail that lends further weight to his argument. The literary evidence is essential, but his grasp of historical relevance enhances the impact of combining the two disciplines (indeed, if they could truly be separated in the first instance). This is most effectively exemplified in the empathetic discussion of the problems facing the gentry, notably the constant spectre of mortality. That death affected contemporary life is obviously not a new statement, but the issue of inheritance cast a shadow over this social group perhaps more so than any other. Fear of the threat of extinction is ingrained into the plethora of possible – and occasionally fantastical – resolutions presented in Johnston’s series of miscellanies. This highlights yet another of the author’s strengths in the book. Despite the serious nature of a lot of the content, he does not allow the reader to harbour a sense of pessimism. Rather, reference to the humour in the miscellanies is combined with Johnston’s clear appreciation of the texts to create an optimistic atmosphere. Johnston’s gentry are guided by his romances; they are instructed in the ways of survival.

The effortless descent further into the sources is accomplished commendably. By making contact with the actual manuscript he is able to bring its physical evidence to the fore. He posits that manuscript ownership is demonstrably evident in codicological features, that is, the physical elements of the document. Whilst scribal identity is uncertain in the majority, Johnston uses his grasp of codicology and palaeography respectively to reach a conclusion of a local production and date based on the patterns present. The proximity of the production to gentry landholdings forms the basis of this theory. Whilst this is not sufficient ground for an
absolutely watertight conclusion, the author continues in his efforts throughout the book to find evidential connections between the miscellanies and their aristocratic owners. It should be noted that he has included a helpful amount of images to assist the reader both in his arguments and to create a sense of familiarity with the texts. Faceless documents are somewhat difficult to engage with, and to lose his readership at this stage would be a great shame. It is again reflective of an ability to take his readership into consideration.

The manuscripts associated with the Derbyshire landowners – the Findern Anthology and the Heege Manuscript – are argued to be reflective of a small, local community of minor aristocracy and the sub-aristocratic, debatably yeoman Sherbrooke family respectively. At a first glance the latter appears to go against the grain of what has come previously: why would a yeoman family be included if they have been noted to be sub-gentry? Here Johnston has created a clever design, partly guided by the availability of source material and partly by his faith in his own theory. By searching for evidence beyond the social parameters of the research he is able to suggest, quite convincingly, that romances were entangled with contemporary notions of gentry identity. By doing so he is reinforcing the idea that the gentry cannot be universally defined, particularly towards the lower end of their social hierarchy. For the Sherbrooke family, their manuscript ‘offered a vision of social advancement’ (p. 143). By 1614 this vision had still not materialised.

By contrast, those associated with the Findern Anthology maintained a firm footing within the aristocratic community. Here Johnston chooses to concentrate on 

Sir Degrevant, a romance appealing to two slightly different aspects of gentry identity: the common concern of the threat from the nobility above and from gentry neighbours. The former point is not necessarily indicative of a threat of violence, more one of suppression; the latter is embroiled in property disputes. Johnston aligns the disputes of the Finderns with those experienced by the protagonist of the romance, Degrevant. Signatures and marginalia are used to identify contributions by and association with other local families, namely the Shirleys, Cottons, Crukers and Francises.

The romance of 

Sir Degrevant can also be found in another surviving miscellany owned by the prominent gentry manuscript owner, Robert Thornton. Thornton’s two miscellanies have received much attention; he is responsible for the preservation of five unique romances in his own hand and recorded eight more. Johnston helpfully provides an in-depth account of Thornton’s background to demonstrate certain areas of interest, complimented by siting him in the cultural – and political – context of the North Riding of Yorkshire. Indeed, the political turmoil of the Wars of the Roses is noted to be of particular influence. Thornton’s romances are concerned with forging a socioeconomic cavity for the gentry in a society dominated by the upper aristocracy. He is thus presented as being heavily preoccupied with self-preservation, but at the same time depressed at the idea of a futile upward aspiration. Evidence in the romances for the latter can be traced to 

Sir Eglamour and Sir Degrevant, whilst the advancement towards self-preservation and the conservation of inheritance in 

Octavian is physically visible in the tomb of his parents at Holy Trinity Church in Stonegrave.

In stark contrast with Thornton’s case, Johnston’s final case study is geographically devoid of noble competition. Based on the evidence found within their manuscript, the Lancashire-based Ireland family appear to have enjoyed a slightly more confident attitude towards their social superiors. Johnston posits that, due to the relatively secure economic position of the family, they were in a better position to believe in their ability to supersede class differences. Indeed, the absence of the upper nobility in the county did not stop the family from associating with others more powerful than themselves. Intermarriage with the powerful Stanley family further cemented the Irelands’ socioeconomic standing in the local area, but in turn created the risk of domination.

The inclusion of the lengthy confirmation of the Irelands’ rights as lords of the manor of Hale exposes an interest in accounting and in their defence of their position in the face of the Stanleys. Indeed, their cartulary is inscribed with the victorious outcome of a court dispute with the neighbouring Leigh family, demonstrating an invested interest in the consolidation of power in manuscript form. Their interest in accounting, however, contrasts with the practice of largesse, that is, the dispensation of money and gifts to
supporters. The inclusion of *Sir Amadace* in the miscellany is representative of the mercantile alternative for members of the gentry. Amadace’s hesitance, however, to honour his deal with the White Knight (later discovered to be the merchant of the tale) suggests a general reluctance to participate wholly in a mercantile-based economy. But Johnston is careful to point out that, despite the ‘flirtation with such different forms of economics’ (p. 238), Amadace eventually returns to the comfortable confines of the aristocratic dwelling. *The Avowing of Arthur*, on the other hand, is possibly reflective of the Irelands’ confidence in the security of their social position, especially in the face of their powerful neighbours. Baldwin’s disinclination to engage with the Arthurian tasks initiated by a locally-ramping boar separates him from the other characters. Whilst the chivalrous knights prepare to engage the boar, Baldwin goes to bed, reflecting his freedom in making his own choices and in turn, the security of his position.

To conclude, Johnston has managed to amass and present a large amount of material from which he has teased a fascinating conclusion. It is a welcome addition to the substantial historiography which exists for studies of the gentry, book culture and manuscript production in the late medieval period. It is written in a manner which is accessible to the expert and to the relatively inexperienced – the focus on literary romance should not discourage those who are less well-versed in the discipline. The potentially arduous task of guiding the reader through a minefield of manuscript vocabulary is done well, which cannot always be said for research in the discipline. The book is frequently punctuated with the author’s commendable ability to cross the interdisciplinary divide. One foot remains quietly, but effectively, in each camp throughout. The research draws attention to the vast potential of the sources beyond Johnston’s focus for many different branches of historical enquiry; he deserves credit for being able to analyse them in such a promising and fruitful capacity. Admittedly, it has not been possible to do Johnston’s meticulous literary analysis justice in this review. To attempt to describe it would be to detract from the author’s masterful grasp of his discipline. It is hoped sincerely that his work will encourage others to develop this approach, encouraged in their task by its vast and rewarding potential. In this book Johnston has made an insightful, fascinating contribution to our understanding of the world of the gentry of late medieval England, and in particular to their relationship with contemporary literary culture.

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